

A Monk Means No Monk: Living a Monastic Life

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When I was a high school student, I was enthralled by the Buddhist film, *Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?* I had almost no interest in Buddhism at the time, and I didn't intend to see the movie to learn about Buddhism. Like no other film I had ever seen, the movie dwelled on the stillness of our reality, seeming to record like a documentary, the moment-by-moment realities of the few characters and their interactions in the film. Not to overpraise this movie—it was in fact a little bit slow and boring at times, but the film's impact was deep and lingered with me for a good while.

For the majority of this film, we see only three characters, and the other main “actors” were earthly, idyllic shots of the sky, the birds, the wind, the field, and a quiet temple. Dwelling on daily life at a small hermitage, the film's plot centers on an old monk showing the young monk with whom he was entrusted how to live as a monk, largely without any dialogue.

Among those scenes, the young monk, most likely in his twenties or thirties, is full of anguish. A flashback in the middle of the film illuminates his past, showing his troubled life before becoming a monk. As a child, he lived with his mother, who is blind and could not walk by herself, in a shabby dwelling on the outskirts of the city. Through a life stemming from this human suffering, the young man decided to devote his life to the Buddhist teachings. In deciding to follow this path, he concludes to leave his mother, who cannot live a normal life. The film shows a striking image of the monk running away from home crying, full of suffering.

Even after leaving, the young monk struggles with self-confidence, never forgetting that he abandoned his single mother, selfishly pursuing a monastic life for his own purpose. He often feels skeptical about his life choice to become a monk, and often shows rebellious behavior against even his trusted master. The elder monk is an unfriendly teacher, who often scolds and uses harsh measures to teach his young disciple.

One day the younger monk becomes incredibly angry, and—I'm unable to remember the exact lines—cries out something like, “The world of *samsara* is full of suffering sentient beings. But you dwell in this idle hermitage in a

mountain and just enjoy your nirvana. Is that why you became a monk?” The older monk shouts back without hesitation, “Do you really think I want to be buried here on this mountain? Because fools like you keep coming up to this mountain, I have to remain here!”

The reason the old monk needs to bend his back is on account of the fools. Said in a more refined, noble way, we could call this the ultimate purpose of Buddhism, the direction I myself follow. Yet, many monastics feel as though they are imprisoned for that very reason. In a situation where I myself have not achieved peace, the source of that is the duality of the self. Personally, I too have had many painful experiences. So, what is the solution?

I once heard an impressive story about Zen Master Su Bong. Soon after he became a monk, having a doubt about his monk's life he asked Zen Master Seung Sahn, “What does it mean to be a monk?”

Seung Sahn said, “A monk means no monk!”

Upon hearing his teacher's answer even in his poor English, Su Bong was greatly inspired.

All of us want to be “something,” but you should be something of “nothing.” You should be a monk as “no-monk.” You should be a mom or dad as “no-mom” or “no-dad.” You should be a lover of someone as “no-lover of someone.” You should be a teacher as “no-teacher.” You should be a practitioner as “no-practitioner.” You should seek enlightenment of “no-enlightenment.” If that happens, you live as a true monk, a true parent, a true lover,

and will become a true teacher. When you don't hold the idea that you are a “practitioner” but just keep going straight with “only don't know,” you become a true practitioner and then true enlightenment blossoms by itself moment to moment.

“Only don't know and just do it.” At the moment when it's fully attained, all opposite ideas disappear. You are the universe, and the universe is you at that moment. You and everything become one. The name for this is substance, or primary point. It's your true nature and true self. In true self, there is no subject or object. In true self, there is no inside and outside. You and everything just become one. Therefore, in



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your true self, no idea of “I” or “you” exists. No idea of “I’m your dad” or “I’m your mom” exists. No idea of “I’m your lover” or “I’m your teacher” exists. No idea of “I’m a monk” or “I want or have got enlightenment” exists.

When you just do it without any delusive thought, your mind is like a clear mirror that reflects everything as it is. Blue comes and just becomes blue. White comes and just becomes white. The scent of a flower, sweet sugar, the sound of a chicken crowing; everything becomes truth. When you can see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think clearly, you have already attained the truth. Then what?

Zen Master Seung Sahn taught that the true meaning of life is to take one more step from there—how to use the truth you’ve attained to help all beings.

How should you live as a mom or dad? What is the correct job as a teacher? How can one give their lover true love? What is the job as a monk and what should one do if one attains enlightenment?

In any kind of lifestyle, it’s essential for you to return to the primary point, the original emptiness that is your true nature, moment to moment, if you wish to live a true life. You should keep trying to return to your true nature where all the opposite ideas originally don’t exist, whether they’re good ideas or bad ideas. That is to become something of nothing. That lets you become truly something for someone and all beings. That is called the great bodhisattva way.

Not long ago, when I heard the news that my hometown

had suffered heavy rain and a great amount of flood damage, my mom was still living alone in my hometown, so I made a phone call to her. Now she is eighty-five, and as always, she said she was OK, because my brothers and sisters are living close by to take good care of her. And as usual, she told me, “You were such a smart kid, I always thought you would succeed. Now that I am old, I wonder if I can see your virtues. You don’t marry and don’t have a family. You have given up all the fun and delightful things of this world but just became a monk. So, should I say, ‘I have lost a son!’? Have compassion for your mother . . .”

With a smile, I always replied, “Mom, I have given you the gift of a much larger family! All the same, I’m sorry for causing you any distress.”

She replies as she always does. I think she’s been saying the same thing for about ten years: “It’s just a joke. I can’t help saying it! Moms will be moms! Just thinking about my life and your life without saying anything would make me too sad. Now, in my truest of hearts, I hope that even as a monk, you have a healthy, happy life and that you follow your heart and find happiness in this life. Truly, this is my wish. Don’t you know your mom’s heart?”

This is Buddha mind. I too wish my mother to be healthy and happy until the moment she parts from this life. Truly, this is all I wish for her. That’s exactly what I wish for all sentient beings.

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of the WWSF 2020 activities such as “Vesak Month, Wake Up Day”; a training course called “Dharma Defender, Count Me In”; a Zen workshop called “The Magical Pouch for Access to Unimpeded Happiness”; and “Walk the Bodhisattva Way with Zen Mind.”

In doing these, many people have spent numerous nights and weekends practicing and rehearsing, as well as familiarizing themselves with the technical requirements of online platforms and video editing. Based on the experiences gained, sangha members of Hoeh Beng Buddhist Temple finally decided to conduct the already-canceled Whole World Is a Single Flower 2020 International Zen Conference entirely online. Of course, we are forever grateful to the support and consent given by the Kwan Um School of Zen to our proposal.

We have observed that many of our lay sangha members have improved their relationships with family members, bosses, and colleagues, as well as among friends. They have fewer worries as a result of practicing meditation and kong-an interviews. Moreover, we have also organized additional activities so that our members can realize their potential, while also attracting new members to practice Zen. More important, we have provided opportunities for members to observe whether they have been able to return to don’t-know mind in dealing with people, keeping correct situation, correct relationship, and correct function from moment to moment. The practice also helps them build

confidence in don’t-know mind and realize the importance of always returning to their true self. In case they feel inadequate, we advise people just to continue doing 108 bows every day.

Hence, we vow to spread this invaluable Zen tradition of our school to as many people as possible. I strongly believe that through continuous and persistent trying, we will eventually be able to make our vow into reality. Naturally, our bodies may feel tired in doing this, but our minds are full of energy and joy. We are indebted to each and every member of the organizing committee. Guided by the teachings of Zen Master Seung Sahn—continuous effort to gain enlightenment and help all beings—we are making history by organizing the first-ever Whole World Is a Single Flower Zen Conference in an online platform, thirty-three years after its inception in 1987.

The spirit of the Whole World Is a Single Flower is not only the compassionate vows of Zen Master Man Gong and Zen Master Seung Sahn. Rather, it is also the compassionate vows of all eminent teachers and buddhas in the past, present, and future. To turn the dharma wheel and fly the Buddhist flag continuously is indeed the mission of all sangha members. It is also our practice. Life after life, only don’t know, try and try for 10,000 years, gain enlightenment, and help all beings.

Translated from Mandarin by Lim Kee Leng.